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Planned and unplanned communications – the problem with greenwashing

To greenwash can be described as an act that misleads or conceals. If an organisation has abused the environment in any way that is harmful and it then puts out misleading information to the contrary, or hides the truth in any way, it can be partaking in an act of greenwashing. Equally, if an organisation is seen as being insincere in its concern for the environment then it will be seen as being involved in greenwashing. This is the equivalent of political 'spin', especially when green 'credentials' are used for another purpose, typically cost reduction or a profit hike. Often money is spent on marketing communications tools such as advertising or packaging/labelling and used to give the impression that an organisation, product or brand is good to the environment. Greenwash (sometimes hogwash or environmental whitewash) has been described as being socially and environmentally destructive in the business arena, being brought in by organisations posing as friends of the environment but also leaders in the eradication of starvation and poverty. The term 'bluewash' has been coined to describe the act of allowing large and rich corporations, who do nothing new, to wrap themselves in the blue flag of the United Nations in order to be seen as being a humanitarian world citizen.

There are many different types of greenwashing. If an organisation offers a truly 'green' product but then gives the impression through advertising, PR, or some other planned form of communication, that this kind of 'green' value system is present in all that the organisation does then this may be seen as greenwashing and become the source of unplanned but negative communication about the organisation. In other words certain actions that are meant to give a positive impression can rebound. There is now a long history of greenwashing that not surprisingly follows that of the environmental movement as claiming to be green can be seen as a counter to criticism or simply seizing upon an opportunity. From the 1960s onward many companies have spent millions on advertising with varying degrees of success. Greenwashing is at the centre of the debate as to whether legislation or self-regulation is the best way forward. The advent of Earth Day (a day in April where people are encouraged to support green projects – visit <http://www.earthday.org/earth-day-2011>) - in 1970 is seen by many as worthwhile but by sceptics who see it as tokenism and a way for people to ease their conscience one day a year. Pressure groups have emerged that oppose the excesses of organisations who engage in greenwashing. Apart from the more famous organisations such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth, CorpWatch is one such organisation that has as a subtitle 'Holding Corporations Accountable' to its name. Like many other organisations CorpWatch is a member of the Greenwash Academy that issues World Summit Greenwash Academy Awards to those organisations deemed culpable in one category or another. In 2002 for example the 'Best Greenwash Award' went to British Petroleum (BP) for their 'Beyond Petroleum' rebranding campaign (the one that saw the emergence of the green and yellow 'sunburst logo'). The charge is that oil companies become solar companies and giant agribusiness claim to provide a solution to world hunger – but that such companies are hypocrites.

Against the backdrop of energy companies being accused of being the biggest polluters globally and in the light of the 2010 BP oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, it is easy to see why there is controversy and conflict. Other activities give rise to suspicion around the practices of the likes of BP and rivals such as ExxonMobil, the latter having questions asked of them regarding the processing of tar sands and the building of vast pipelines. Another charge is that organisations often spend more money on advertising their green projects than on the projects themselves. On the other hand there is advertising industry concern over-regulation by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the USA in the 'environmental advertising' arena but especially around packaging. The principle concern appears to be restrictions on what marketers can tell their consumers about packaging innovation which could lead to the stifling of innovation itself, the argument being that if innovation is stifled then, somewhat ironically, this could contribute to environmental problems if innovations that have a real contribution to make to a greener world and that might have occurred do not. The FTC issue green guidelines to follow and lots of

examples for clarity. One such example is in the automobile sector. If a car manufacturer was to claim a car to be green for (say) its low energy requirements, this would be seen as an oxymoron, especially if the car was fitted with an internal combustion engine. Such a product could only be less harmful to the environment than a more conventional car. The company concerned would have to be careful with its words and phrases that have emerged and used by companies in advertising and other communications. Some examples are 'carbon neutral', 'wholly sustainable' and 'low emission'. Some companies appear to be forgetting that any green claim needs to be true. In the UK, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), like the FTC in America, has made the (CAP) code more specific. Advertising can be withdrawn or have some other sanction imposed. Marketers should take note; complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the UK advertising industry watchdog, have soared in recent years.

There are many scientific grey areas around 'green' technologies which is a challenge for regulators. If an oil company implies in advertising that it uses its waste carbon dioxide in horticulture to, for example, grow flowers, when the reality is that less than one percent of this waste was actually used then there is potential conflict between company, pressure groups, regulators and perhaps Government. If an energy supplier uses consumer-friendly cartoon characters in its advertising to suggest that the company has 'carbon-zero credentials' i.e. no carbon produced, but the reality is that carbon is produced, then there is potential for conflict, and this has led to mistrust on the part of the public when dealing with carbon (or lack of carbon) claims. However greenwashing is not just about energy or energy-linked companies such as car manufacturers or energy suppliers. There are many more complaints about greenwashing in other industries from around the world. For example in the food industries, breakfast cereals that are claimed to be made up of natural ingredients may in fact be genetically modified. 'All natural' meat may have been treated with antibiotics while the animal was still alive, giving rise to the label 'Frankenfood'. Shampoo manufacturers may claim to use natural, organic ingredients whereas in fact they may be using chemicals that are not organic. Airports may grow trees but this will hardly dent the monumental size of their collective carbon footprint and the beef farmers will not compensate what has been lost by flattening traditional land by the creation of a nature reserve.

On a positive note, all is not lost. There are some positive, forward thinking marketers out there that have thought a lot of these issues through. Advice is available on how to avoid false and misleading greenwashing. For example the temptation to propagate one, strong claim around a green attribute which serves to hide other, possibly harmful aspects should be avoided, as should being deliberately vague or irrelevant, where the claim is truthful but unimportant or unhelpful. Companies should also avoid the temptation of using claims that are superficially plausible but where there is no real evidence, or situations where the green claim is true but distracts from environmental impacts elsewhere. They should definitely avoid outright lies where claims are simply false; this is almost surely going to come back to bite them. Companies should understand environmental impacts, the science behind claims, use language that resonates with customers, provide evidence that supports the claim and always tell the truth. This is basic, good PR.

There appears to have been some deliberate but some not so deliberate attempts at greenwashing over the last few decades. Marketers should think about the pitfalls for companies who might be tempted to jump on the green bandwagon. They should also think about and understand the role of pressure groups and organisations such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth and the positive advances that could be made in the green issues arena. Is it possible that large and small companies alike can benefit by thinking through their real green credentials rather than claiming product attributes and company actions that are not quite what they seem. Marketers should consider their stance on environmental leadership and the ways to formulating winning strategies, communications and positioning.